

*The skills of*  
**OUR ABORIGINES**





# THE SKILLS OF OUR ABORIGINES

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1960

*Prepared under the authority of the Acting Minister for Territories, with the co-operation of the Ministers responsible for aboriginal welfare in the Australian States, for use by the National Aborigines' Day Observance Committee and its associates in connexion with the celebration of National Aborigines' Day in Australia, 8th July, 1960.*

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THE BOOKLET "OUR ABORIGINES" (1957), THE PICTORIAL FOLDER "ASSIMILATION OF OUR ABORIGINES" (1958), AND THE BOOKLET "FRINGE DWELLERS" (1959) SHOULD BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH THIS PUBLICATION.







## THE SKILLS OF OUR ABORIGINES

*In their tribal life, aborigines developed special skills to suit the demands placed on them by the limited resources of their environment, to regulate their daily lives and their associations with each other, and to express their feelings about themselves and the mysteries of existence. Thus they survived, they developed a culture, and they established principles of art and religion.*

*Adapting themselves to an unusually harsh, uncompromising environment required in the aborigines skill, patience, fortitude, and considerable resourcefulness. They have shown that they are ingenious and adaptable in establishing a pattern of living admirably suited to and in harmony with the world about them.*

*To-day the aborigines are confronted with new problems. A world of bewildering complexity has disrupted their old way of life. It is pressing upon them with increasing insistence. In adapting themselves to it aborigines have not yet shown the same extent of resourcefulness which characterized their adaptations in the tribal life. A review of the skills of our aborigines, however, provides ample evidence of native intelligence, patience, and ingenuity—traits of the same order as are required for their successful assimilation.*

**Opposite.**—An aboriginal rainmaker. Seasonal magical ceremonies played an important part in the life of tribal aborigines.



## THE FIRST CONTACTS

WHEN THE FIRST European settlers arrived in Australia there were about 300,000 aborigines living here, scattered throughout the continent in relatively small groups. Each semi-nomadic tribe or horde lived within well-established tribal areas which varied greatly in size. The aborigines were hunters and food gatherers. With the exception of the dingo, which they partly tamed, they had no domestic animals; they cultivated no food crops. They had very few material possessions and such as they had were primarily utilitarian. For homes they built only the simplest of bush shelters and, generally, they wore no clothes.

In 1793, Captain Tench of the First Fleet, wrote, "I do not hesitate to declare that the natives of New Holland possess a considerable portion of that acumen, or sharpness of intellect, which bespeaks genius". The general impression the aborigines gave, however, was of a degraded and utterly wretched people whose existence was shallow, crude, and little better than that of animals. Early European settlers saw no signs of villages, cultivation, or obvious social organization, and they had neither the wish nor the time to find if aboriginal life were more subtle or complex than at first it appeared to be.

Initially neither the settlers nor the aborigines bore each other ill will but there were direct conflicts of interest between the two and, as the tide of settlement flowed on, some clashes occurred. The aborigines diminished and declined.

Few attempts were made to understand and appreciate the aboriginal way of life; few observers saw them as an outstanding example of a people living in close harmony with nature, having wonderfully complex social systems regulating their behaviour, profound spiritual beliefs, and some unusual and admirable forms of artistic expression.

Those people of good will whose attitude towards the aborigines was sympathetic (if on the whole, sentimental and impractical) were sometimes subjected to sharp criticism for their views on the "noble savage". As late as 1886, a writer stated of the aborigines: "Moral laws they have none; their festive dances and corrobories are of the most lewd and disgusting character, their songs, rites and ceremonies utterly revolting and fiendish."

First impressions of the aborigines were almost wholly unfavorable. They were not seen as the skilful, adaptable, sensitive people they are.



WONDERFUL MUSEUM



*Killpricara*

A Remarkable Female Inhabitant

*of*  
*New South Wales*

*A person extremely Savage and untamable.*

*Painted from life by Mrs. MacFarlane.*

An engraving (from the Nan Kivell collection) showing an early impression of a New South Wales aboriginal.



## A COMPLEX LIFE

BECAUSE of their need to range far in hunting, fishing, and foraging, the aborigines did not congregate in large groups. Nor did they build permanent shelters or acquire numbers of material possessions. In general they wandered within tribal areas to set seasonal patterns, following game and water supplies. In magical and religious ceremonies they believed they restored, renewed, and strengthened nature's fertility. Husband, wife, and children constituted the basic economic unit in the tribe.

On the surface, aboriginal tribal life seems primitive indeed, requiring some effort but little skill. Yet something of its complexity becomes apparent on examination. Raymond Firth summarizes this in his book "Human Types":

"They (the aborigines) know the habits, markings, breeding grounds, and seasonal fluctuations of all the edible animals, fish, and birds of their hunting grounds. They know the external and some of the less obvious properties of rocks, stones, waxes, gums, plants, fibres, and barks; they know how to make fire; they know how to apply heat to relieve pain, stop bleeding, and to delay the putrefaction of flesh food; and they use also fire and heat to harden some woods and to soften others, and to smooth the insides of dug-out canoes by charring where chipping is no longer possible. They know at least something of the phases of the moon, the movement of tides, the planetary cycles, and the



An old man of the tribe.





**An early photograph of a corroboree no longer performed.**

sequence and duration of the seasons; they have correlated together such climatic fluctuations as wind systems, annual patterns of humidity and temperature, and fluxes in the growth and presence of natural species; and when seasonal scarcities or droughts occur they have several lines of retreat from one food to another, from one area to another, from one water-hole to another. In addition they make an intelligent and economical use of the by-products of animals killed for food. The flesh of a kangaroo is eaten; the sinews become spear bindings; the claws are set into necklaces with wax and fibre; the fat is combined with red ochre as a cosmetic, and the blood is mixed with charcoal as a paint. They have some knowledge of simple mechanical principles, and will trim a boomerang again and again to give it the correct curve, or balance a spear in the hand and then cut small portions from the shaft till it bears the correct ratio to the length of the spear-thrower and the thrower's arm. Moreover, on the non-material side, they have built up a social organization of great complexity, punctuated with rich and dramatic ceremonial observances, and a body of imaginative tales in the form of myths, legends, and religious beliefs."



**An early photograph showing east coast aborigines wearing skin cloaks.**







## SKILLS OF SURVIVAL

IN SOME PLACES, native people have required to make little effort or develop few skills in order to survive. They have found an equable climate, foodstuffs of various sorts in abundance, cultivable crops, and animals which could be domesticated. The Australian aborigines had few of these advantages. Nevertheless, they developed extraordinary skills as hunters, extracted the utmost from their poor environment in natural foodstuffs (but never entirely depleting it) and survived in the face of appalling odds.

As hunters, tribal aborigines are superb. They can identify the trails of animals and track them through country where, to unskilled eyes, the animals leave not a trace; they stalk game, such as kangaroos and emus, with infinite patience, approaching their quarry, sometimes in open country, until within spear throw; they make lures and traps. Aboriginal women and children winnow grass seed; and they dig for edible roots, bulbs and grubs.

Constantly on the move, tribal aborigines do not need permanent dwellings; only in a few areas do they build reasonably substantial shelters or, formerly, live in caves. Generally wearing no clothes, they adapt themselves to climatic change.

The aborigines could not of course allow their country to become overpopulated. Using, with discretion, abortion and infanticide, they

*Opposite.*—Aborigines playing didjeridoo and clapping sticks, and an aboriginal artists' bark painting. The didjeridoo (or drone pipe) is found only in northern Australia.

*Below.*—Aboriginal hunters of the semi-desert area of central Australia. The spear (and woomera) was the most common weapon. Heavy boomerangs were also used for game and thrown into flocks of birds. (The returning boomerang, found only in the coastal areas, was merely a plaything.)











**Witchetty grubs, a favoured item of diet in some areas. Aboriginal women and children forage for grubs and edible roots.**

maintained a delicate balance between their numbers and approximately the maximum that the country could support without the advantages of metal, agriculture, and technological development. They had a oneness with nature; theirs was a most harmonious adaptation to a difficult environment.

They organized themselves in economic groups (hordes, tribes, or sub-tribes) appropriate in size to the task of survival. Rarely did these groups number more than 500; frequently they were as small as 100. As groups and as individuals they fitted themselves to survive where only the animals of the Australian bush and desert could survive besides them.

*Opposite, above.*—Fishermen from the tropical north coast.

*Opposite, below.*—Rabbits are not, of course, indigenous to Australia but they spread into aboriginal tribal areas where aborigines adapted their hunting methods to catch them.







## ABORIGINAL CRAFTS

TRIBAL aborigines had no knowledge of metal. Essentially they were a stone age people. Nevertheless, they showed a high order of skill in developing weapons and utensils to meet their simple needs.

To make a stone spear head, chisel, scraper, knife, or axe, for example, was not entirely a simple process. It involved selection of the most suitable type of stone, careful chipping and flaking of it to shape (pressure flaking, in particular, required special skill) and, usually, fixing it to a handle.

With such simple tools, aborigines felled trees, carved out canoes, made wooden shields and receptacles for food, and shaped delicately-balanced objects such as woomeras, spears, and boomerangs. In some areas they teased out vegetable fibres to make twine; in other places animal fur and even human hair were rolled and woven to make string. Some groups developed considerable skill in making baskets and nets. Gum from trees, wax, and a resinous substance obtained from spinifex, were used as adhesives.

The nomadic habits of aborigines limited the range of articles groups or individuals could own and carry with them whilst the material culture of tribal aborigines was that of nomadic hunters. Pottery was not developed, probably because of the difficulty of carrying fragile articles on long journeys. Many of the articles they made are obviously the products of skilled craftsmen, proud of their workmanship.

Aboriginal craftsmanship illustrates the skilful exploitation of limited resources, and adaptation to social and cultural needs.

*Opposite.*—An aboriginal craftsman making a woomera. The woomera acts as an extension of the arm in throwing a spear so that far greater leverage is applied. The haft of the spear rests on a pivot at one end of the woomera. Both spears and woomeras have to be carefully balanced. In some areas woomeras are flat and plain; in others they are like shallow dishes with a handle at one end.





*Above.*—Stone axes. *Below.*— Old men decorating shields.





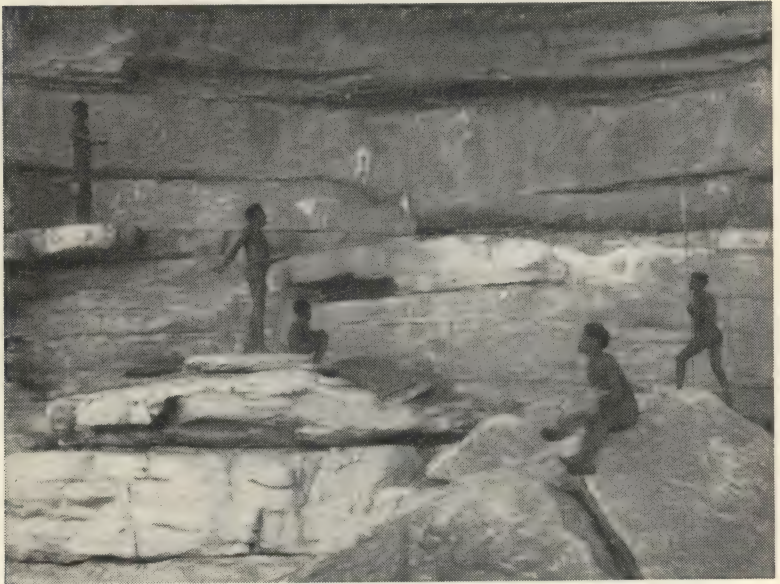
## ABORIGINAL ARTS

**ABORIGINAL** painting, although highly stylized in its various forms, has recently been recognized as having considerable intrinsic merit. The remarkable bark paintings and X-ray art of Arnhem Land show a breadth of artistic expression, a liveliness and, often, a subtlety, that might well have been unsuspected.

Other art forms, the widespread rock paintings and carvings, carved poles, decorations on shields, weapons, and utensils, and the bodily decorations associated with initiation and corroborees, all show a primitive vigour. The designs carved into trees in some areas, and the ritual totemic emblems laboriously cut into sacred objects are balanced and pleasing in design. Aboriginal music is, perhaps, difficult to understand. The drone of the didgeridoo, the rhythmic beat of clapping sticks or the slap of thighs, and the apparently monotonous wail of singers are, nevertheless, expressive.

As dancers, the aborigines are superb. Naturally, styles and standards vary. It is here that, perhaps, the individual artist has the best opportunity of personal expression.

Although they have no written language, aborigines nevertheless have a considerable literature: they are artists in stories, legends, and long narrative poems.



A gallery of aboriginal rock paintings.



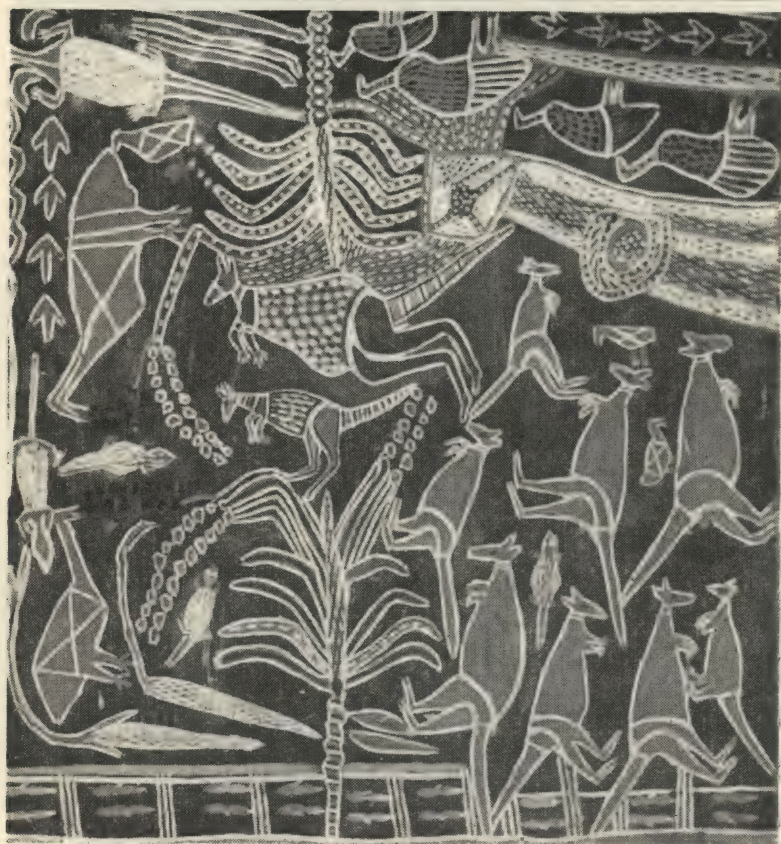


*Above.*—A selection of totemic designs.

*Opposite, above.*—West Australian station aborigines performing a corroboree.

*Opposite, below.*—An aboriginal bark painting telling the story of a hunt.







## THE SECRET LIFE

THE ONE integrating force in aboriginal culture is its profoundly spiritual nature. All aboriginal social institutions and usages (most of which are extraordinarily complex) are influenced in some measure by the aborigines' deeply spiritual beliefs.

Aborigines are capable of intense introspection and contemplation. Their beliefs link them in a mystical way with the natural world around them, with pre-existent (and co-existent) cult heroes, and



An old photograph of an aboriginal boy painted in preparation for a ceremony connected with one stage of his initiation.



with the sources of life and development. Through their religion, tribal customs are explained and sanctified; through their religion, also, in the enactment of ritual, they express themselves more adequately than they are able to do within the restrictive limits of their material environment.

The philosophical basis of aboriginal society is rather too fragile to withstand the stresses of social change; there are no suitable aboriginal institutions that can easily be used as a basis for community growth. Aboriginal mysticism and religion, however, are the mainspring of aboriginal existence in the tribe. They can give an assurance of security in a period of change and, perhaps, provide the foundations for new beliefs and religious philosophies.

An important consideration, however, is that sacred sites and objects, and rituals, chants and observances are to the aborigines more than merely outward and visible signs of their spiritual beliefs. In the past, aborigines excluded from these symbols have been virtually excluded from their religion itself. In a changing world, re-education of aboriginal spiritual beliefs needs to be profound as well as sympathetic.

**A representation of an aboriginal sacred site. These places, which have the nature of shrines, have a particular significance to tribal aborigines, being a source of spiritual strength. Usually, only tribal elders are allowed to take part in ceremonies at these places.**







### **A PERIOD**

OF THE 75,000 to 80,000 people in Australia who are predominantly aboriginal, only about 50,000 are full aborigines, and considerably less than half of these now lead tribal or even partly tribal lives. Most have been affected, in some measure, by white settlement in Australia.

After the first clash of European and aboriginal interests (with the breaking down of aboriginal social and religious organizations, belief in the future, and will to survive), aborigines in contact with European ways showed a remarkable adaptation to the new way of life that had been imposed on them. Great numbers of them became,

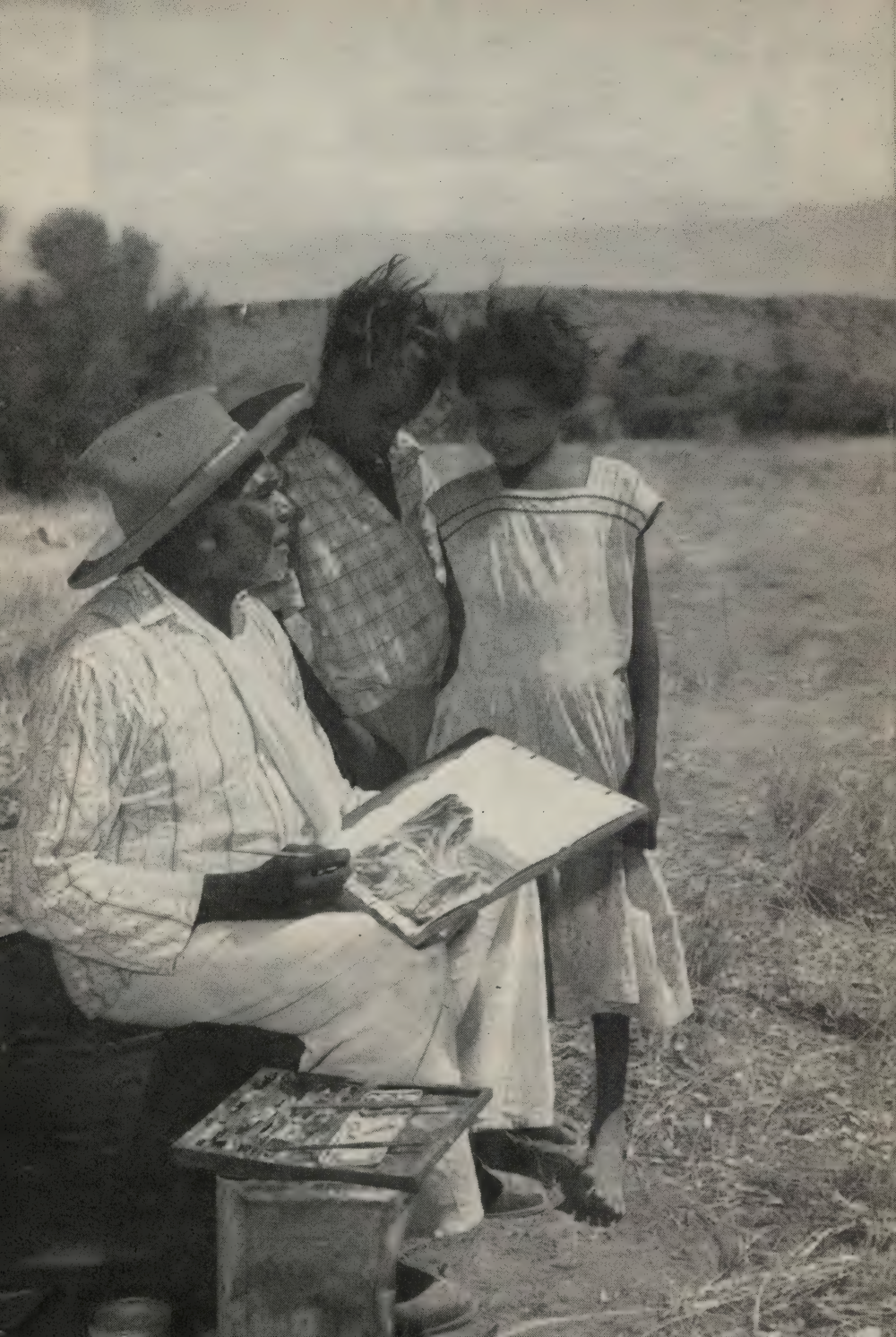


## OF CHANGE

and many of them still are, fringe dwellers—people living on the outskirts of a culture but not taking part fully in it, or belonging wholly to it, retaining many of their aboriginal ways, adopting a way of life which, unsatisfactory though it was and is in many ways, is a skilful adaptation.

Change is still taking place amongst the aborigines, but it is now a directed and organized change. The Commonwealth Government, and the various State Governments, with the help of the Christian Missions, are now guiding and helping the Australian aborigines towards their proper place in the modern world.





## THE POLICY OF ASSIMILATION

THE Commonwealth Government (directly responsible only for the aborigines in the Northern Territory) and State Governments (each directly responsible for the aborigines within its own borders) are attacking the aboriginal problem constructively and vigorously, with mounting expenditure and effort on aboriginal welfare and development.

These Governments now agree that the problem, in its simplest form, is that of assimilation. They agree that the numerically small aboriginal group within the vastly larger white Australian group must, to survive and to prosper, learn to live as white Australians do, and to think as white Australians do. The problem is not a racial one—it is a social problem, a problem of enabling people to live together on equal terms and in the same society with benefit to themselves and to each other.

With all their skill, with all their sense of artistry, with all their deep spiritual convictions, aborigines often appear ill-equipped to enter the new way of life. They need help, not so much because they are lacking in basic skills or because they are racially different from other Australians, but because of the vast difference between their old way of life and the new. Moreover, aborigines are especially sensitive to opinions about them and criticisms of them. The problem is a human one—aborigines need to be welcomed into the new way of life, and helped in adjusting themselves to it. The situation is not one that can be legislated for. The situation is one that has to be faced by the community at large as well as by the Governments who bear the direct responsibility for the aborigines. Aborigines need help to develop their skills in the new environment, and help in adjusting themselves to a way of life that is, in its own way, as difficult as that which confronted their forbears centuries ago.

Assimilation does not mean that the aborigines should lose their racial identity, or lose contact with their arts, their crafts, and their philosophy. There is, indeed, a contribution to be made by aborigines to the Australian culture now and in the future. People like Albert Namatjira (opposite) and his fellow artists, have shown how valuable this contribution can be.



## HEALTH AND EDUCATION

GOVERNMENT and Mission efforts for the advancement of the aborigines vary according to present conditions and present means, but so far as health is concerned, the primary task is, of course, to detect, prevent, and cure diseases. Because of the vast difference between the aboriginal tribal culture and the state of aborigines in the contact situation, special attention is given also to nutrition and child welfare.

The health of the aboriginal community, whether in isolated areas well away from the main centres of settlement or on the fringes of towns and cities, is a necessary prerequisite to their social, economic and political advancement.

In the Northern Territory, settlements are centres where health services are provided; there also the aged, sick and infirm are cared



A woodwork class for aborigines in New South Wales. The Commonwealth Government, and the various State Governments, each facing different problems in aboriginal education, are pressing ahead with the task of fitting aborigines to play a useful and satisfying role in the community, and develop an economic application of their skills.



Vigorous measures are taken to protect the health of aborigines throughout Australia.

for. Vocational and other training is provided, not only for children, but for adults who will benefit from it. Similarly, in the States, there are Government and Mission centres serving these or similar purposes. Settlements are not an end in themselves. **They provide** temporary protection in a period of transition, aiding the aborigines in their advancement towards ultimate assimilation. The end object is to have no such special facilities for aborigines, no special protection, no special schools.

The real hope for assimilation lies with the children and their education generally is intended, not merely to fulfil the normal educational requirements, but to fit them for taking their place in society. Emphasis is therefore given at the present stage to training for occupations where the aborigines have shown particular aptitude—in the Northern Territory, for example, various apprenticeships, and training in the pastoral industry, are provided. Consideration must, of course, be given to the range and availability of employment. The basic aim of education is to fit the aborigines for full citizenship. The problem, however, is not a simple one; overcoming the difficulties and disadvantages of a primitive background is but one aspect of it.





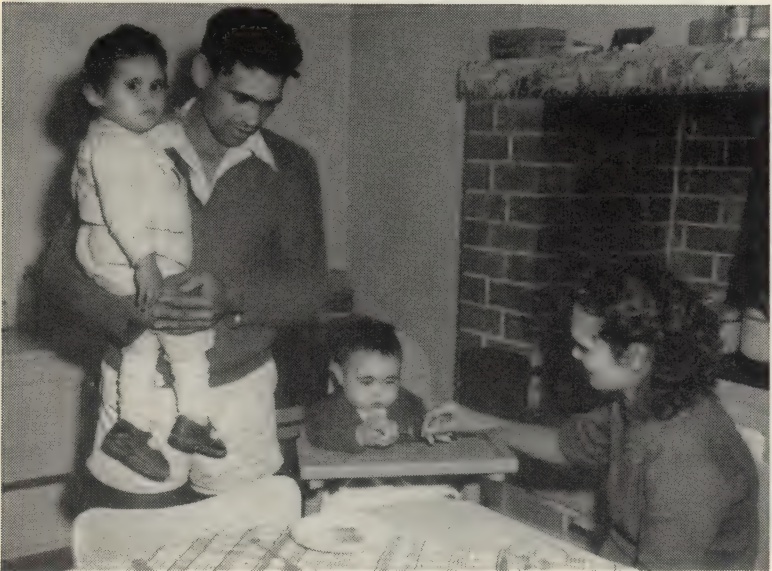
## HOUSING

THE PRIMITIVE nomad needs no home; but a settled native does. In the initial stages of contact aborigines have shown a positive reluctance to live in houses. In many areas overcoming this initial reluctance is still a problem. In other areas, however, the problem of housing is different. In the more closely settled areas the main problem is to induce aborigines to advance their standard of housing and to educate the remainder of that community to accept them.

A primary object is to house aborigines and part-aborigines within the normal residential areas. Some of the aborigines themselves—in particular those who still live in large numbers in shanties—need to be encouraged to move to non-segregated homes in the normal residential areas and establish their social and economic independence.

Houses, of course, must be furnished and this requires, usually, effort within the white economic system.

Vigorous but careful work is being done by the Government and the Missions and, in some instances, by benevolent community groups to house aborigines properly.



*Above.*—Many aborigines and part-aborigines given the opportunity, maintain high standards of living.

*Opposite.*—Many aborigines still live in sub-standard houses (top) but the various Governments have housing projects to raise aboriginal standards. On Government stations in the Northern Territory (bottom) aborigines help build their own dwellings.





**Many aborigines have found useful employment in occupations related to tribal life or involving relatively simple skills. The range and availability of employment are important considerations in employment training.**

## EMPLOYMENT

**MANY** aborigines have made a place for themselves in the white economic system. In many cases they have utilized or adapted basic aboriginal skills—the tracker and the stockman, for example. usefully use their consummate bushcraft.

Some aboriginal groups have successfully developed mining, fishing, and other economic enterprises.

On the whole, aborigines have found employment only in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. There is no doubt, however, that aborigines have the capacity to become highly skilled tradesmen (as, indeed, some have) and, perhaps, advance to positions of far greater responsibility and importance than any of them so far have attained.



In some areas, enterprising aborigines and part-aborigines have formed co-operative groups and are, to some extent, independent. Many, however, depend on the sympathy (or lack of prejudice) of employees.



## THE ABORIGINAL TRADITION

THE ABORIGINAL heritage presents something of an enigma. Many aspects of it, such as the aboriginal tendency to go on "walk-about", to accept relatively low standards in housing, and to fulfil what would have been their obligations in the tribal state, are a positive hindrance to their advancement. On the other hand, there are many virtues that belong to the aboriginal tribal life, many arts, and many skills, that can well be carried forward into the new life, to enrich it, and to provide for the aborigines something of a link with the past and provide them with justifiable grounds for pride in their aboriginal identity. Aborigines have already demonstrated their skill in many fields, especially sport.



A fringe occupation of aborigines—catering for the tourist trade—involves something of both old and new skills.

The aboriginal stockman who plays his didjeridoo to entertain his mates in the drafting camp, the artisan who makes boomerangs for the tourist trade, the enterprising aboriginal man or woman who can build a small business around aboriginal arts and crafts are examples, in a small way, of the carry-through of the aboriginal tradition.

The merit of aboriginal art is now being recognized by designers. aboriginal music and dancing have had some small recognition, and aboriginal myths and legends now form a small part of our tradition in literature. It may well be that further developments of this sort in the near future will provide aborigines with a pride and a unity that they have previously lacked.



The didjeridoo (in this case fashioned from a piece of piping) is an aboriginal instrument that may find a place in modern music.



# WHAT CAN BE DONE?

THE VARIOUS Governments, the Missions, and benevolent community groups are not sufficient alone to produce the ultimate object of assimilation of the aboriginal population, and it is often not possible for them to assist aborigines individually and in groups to achieve happiness and fulfilment as full members of the community.

There are many people of good will who wish to help the aborigines; to bring them into local community activities, sporting life, or the church; to help guide young aborigines in a career, or in commerce; to help to provide higher education or scholarships; who are concerned about aboriginal shanty towns, or unwise drinking by aborigines (often a symbol of frustration and despair), or low standards of sanitation and hygiene in aboriginal fringe communities.

There are many organizations devoted to the object of advancing the welfare of the aborigines, who will welcome help, ideas, and energy, in furthering their objects. One organization which is prepared to serve as a clearing house for ideas, to assist and guide people of good will who wish to do constructive work in this field, is the National Aborigines' Day Observance Committee, 472 Kent-street, Sydney, New South Wales.

The remarkable achievements of bodies such as the "Good Neighbour Councils" in assisting the assimilation of New Australians can be matched by community and individual efforts to help original Australians to find their proper place in the modern world, to find personal fulfilment, and to develop their individual capacities and skills.





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